Speaking of Learning...

Recollections, Revelations, and Realizations

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WHAT IF I HAD SAID “NO”?

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WHAT IF I HAD SAID “NO”?

Milk, music, and memories ...
INTRODUCING LARA

The summer heat is both the beauty and challenge of living in Melbourne at the start of the school year. It is early February and the mercury is threatening to move into the high 30s for the third time this week. The holidays are over and we are into the first week of school at East Doncaster High School.

The bell sounds for morning recess as I chase the stragglers from my PE class out of the change rooms and back to the main school building. I follow my students into the lower quadrangle as I mentally rehearse the introduction of Nassi-Shneiderman diagrams for my Year 11 Computer Science class after recess.

A shout interrupts my thoughts.

Mr. Clarke. Mr. Clarke!

Amid the throng of students I see Lara hurrying towards me. I smile and before I get a chance to say anything she calls out:

Are we going to enter?

I taught Lara three years ago in my Year 7 Physical Education and Year 7 Computer Studies classes but have not taught her since. She is slightly out of breath from her jog across the quadrangle.
Good morning Lara.

Good morning, Mr. Clarke. Did you hear about the contest?

What contest?

Big M on Triple M.

I shake my head as Lara continues.

First prize is a free Angels concert.

Lara and I are big Angels fans. We discovered this at the Year 7 Camp three years ago. Whenever we bump into each other now we exchange Angels stories. There are not too many things that we don’t know about the Angels but she has caught me flat-footed this time.

Really?

We need to collect Big Ms.

Big Ms?

Yeah, it was on Triple M.

Big Ms on Triple M?

I feel as though I am in an echo chamber.

Yeah.

The bell rings signalling the start of the third period.

Lara, I have to get to class. Let’s chat at lunchtime?

Where?

A-Block.

OK.

Lara turns and with a smile heads off to class. I have no idea what Lara is talking about. I have been away all summer and just returned to Melbourne. However, I do know that:

— Big M is Australia’s most popular brand of flavoured milk;
— Triple M is Melbourne’s most popular rock radio station; and
— the Angels are Australia’s most popular rock band.
Exactly how the three are connected remains to be seen. However, I have never
seen Lara as excited as she is today.

I find that sometimes Lara can be a bit vague or disorganized. She often
seemed that way in my Grade 7 classes; neither Physical Education nor Computing
Studies seemed to interest her very much. Lara is one of those students who
quietly fades into the background. She doesn’t make a fuss. She is not a bother.
Her grades are passable but not memorable. With 30 or more students in most high
school classes, it is often hard to recall students like Lara after having taught them
for only one year.

My double block of Year 11 Computer Science ends and I head for the A-Block
staffroom. Lara is waiting at the door with two friends.

_We’re here._

_Let me put my books down and I will be right back._

As I enter the staffroom Silvana passes me the Year 7 Camp consent forms, Mark
asks if volleyball training is on today, and Eberhard reminds me that the math
teachers’ meeting is on Thursday. I put my books on my desk and retrace my steps,
following two math teachers, Andrew and Alfred, out the door. As I leave I hold
the door open as Ms. McLure, the mathematics coordinator, quietly enters the
staffroom.

Lara and her friends are waiting patiently. They follow me out of A-Block into
the lower quadrangle. I am struck by the multicoloured summer outfits worn by
the staff in contrast to the muted grey and blue school uniforms of the students.
The colour of their uniforms reflects parents’ conservative values in this _nouveau
riche_ suburb on the northeastern fringes of Melbourne.

_Lara, you have my undivided attention! What’s this Angels thing?_

_It was on the Triple M last night. It’s a competition. The school that collects
the most Big M labels wins a free Angels concert at their school._

All three girls squeal in unison: “Yeaaaaa!” I clasp my hands over my ears.

_Big M labels?_

_Yes. There are two on every carton._

I probably have one Big M milk drink a month (usually after yelling myself hoarse
at a rock concert). I like vanilla malt. All the other flavours are too sweet (e.g.,
strawberry, banana, chocolate, etc.). A momentary thought passes through my
mind: “Should a PE teacher be supporting a contest involving sugary drinks?”

_Go on._

_We can get the whole school to bring in Big Ms. And we can cut out the
labels._

The thought of squeezing another activity into my already busy schedule makes me
cringe.

_How long is the competition? When did it start? When does it finish?_

_10 weeks. It started last week. It finishes on March 15th._

_And you want the whole school involved?_
Yes, that is the only way we will have a chance of winning.

Lara has a point. We are a mid-sized high school compared to other public schools and some of the larger private schools that have more than one campus.

*Let me think on it.*

Lara shakes her head in mock contempt at my use of the currently popular Meatloaf lyric. She doesn’t agree with all of my musical tastes!

That night my younger brother who is possibly the biggest Angels fan in Australia (he rarely misses a concert and travels interstate to see them perform) fills me in on the details. Schools throughout Victoria have 6 weeks to collect Big M labels. There are two Big M labels on each milk carton. Each label is worth one point. The final points tally has to be verified by the school principal. The school with the most points by March 15th wins a fully-staged Angels concert at their school.

The Angels are one of the most popular, if not the most popular, bands in Australia. They perform at large venues or stadiums. It is hard to visualize an Angels concert in the East Doncaster High School gymnasium.

Lara’s fantasy of winning seems just that, a fantasy. Students from our school are very successful in their academic studies, on the sports field, and in the performing arts. But are they milk-carton-collecting champions?

Lara seeks me out 45 minutes before the start of school the next day indicating her evident excitement for the project. I am knee-deep in orienteering equipment.

*Mr. Clarke. Melissa and I collected some Big Ms last night.*

Lara holds up a plastic Safeway bag containing a dozen or more Big M cartons.

She smiles. I smile.

She laughs. I laugh.

We both know I am being manipulated.

*OK. Lara. I’m in. But first I have to run this by Mr. Burns.*

*Where can I put these?*

*Leave them with me. I will put them in the A-Block staffroom.*

*Thank youuuuuuuu, Mr. Clarke.*

It’s only a small thing, but when a student says “Thank you,” with such delight and enthusiasm, then you can’t help but feel the influence that you, as a teacher, can have on the students in your care. Much later in my career, Gary Fenstermacher (1992) put into words what I was unable to articulate or perhaps even recognize that day: that there are two powerful forces at play in education, a “system of schooling” versus “the educative agenda.” The system of schooling is about timetabling, scheduling, assessing, recording, and reporting. The educative agenda is entirely different in its emphasis: it focuses on providing support and success, in the fullest sense possible (not just academic), in the ways that students come to know and interact with the world. Unbeknown to me, I was responding to the educative agenda.

Mr. Burns, our principal, is a caring but cautious gentleman. Furthermore, every school decision he makes only occurs after he gives it serious consideration. The Big M/Triple M Angels contest won’t be an easy sell. If I propose a
harebrained idea, in the kindest possible way he will say “No.” If I propose a fair to middling idea, in the kindest possible way he will say “No.” If I have a good idea, he will say, “Can I get back to you?” He definitely won’t make an on-the-spot decision.

Tom, thanks for seeing me. I have an idea I would like to run by you.

He nods.

I am glad you are sitting down! Just joking. I was approached by Lara Diamond, in Year 10, with an idea for a school-wide event.

I can’t place her.

She is a good kid. Nothing outstanding but solid. She wants the school to enter a contest.

A contest?

Yes. With Triple M.

His left eyebrow goes up.

The rock station?

Yes. We have to collect Big Ms.

His right eyebrow joins his left.

The milk company?

Yes. The prize is an Angels concert.

Both eyebrows collide with his hairline. Clearly Lara’s proposal surprises him.

He pauses. After a few more questions casts the contest in the broader context of the school community. Is the Student Representative Council involved? Will it compete with other school events? Would the staff be supportive? Etc. He doesn’t say “No” but he is laying out the “bigger picture.” I indicate that these are all good questions but that I don’t have the answers just yet. I suggest that, if nothing else, a school-wide contest provides a good chance to build East Doncaster’s esprit de corps—something that I know Tom will see as a positive.

To further allay his concerns I suggest that it is highly unlikely that we would actually win the contest—there are too many other schools bigger than us—and that our participation will likely peter out before the March 15th deadline. Nonetheless, we would all have had some fun along the way. Tom glances down at the papers on his desk, signalling that our conversation is drawing to a close, and asks:

Anything else that I should know?

At the end of March we could sell our Big M collection to the highest bidder!

Both eyebrows up again.

Just joking!

Eyebrows back to the neutral position. Tom’s response is not unexpected.

Can I get back to you?
The fact that Tom is willing to consider the possibility of the Big M/Triple M Angels contest is a good sign. At the end of the day I meet with Lara and four of her friends (the newly formed Angels Committee). I fill them in on my meeting with the principal and ask them how they think we should proceed if we are allowed to enter the competition. They offer a few suggestions and agree to draw up a plan. As they head for the school gate, backpacks slung over their shoulders, I wonder if any homework will get done this week.

To my surprise Lara places a plan on my desk first thing the next morning. I marvel at what she has sketched out. She seems to have left no stone unturned. Lara has a future career in event planning! I am beginning to think that I have underestimated her talents.

After recess, I catch up with Tom. He has a few more questions and with the help of Lara’s plan I am able to answer most of them. He warms to the idea of the contest. He lays down “a few boundary conditions” for the school is going to be involved (e.g., a staff member overseeing the competition). After 30 minutes our conversation draws to a close, by which time Tom agrees that a school-wide event like the Big M/Triple M Angels concert would set a good tone for the start of the school year. He gives his approval to enter the competition believing that our chances of winning are slim to nil.

THE COMPETITION

Monday, Week 2 of the competition

With the principal’s approval, Lara and her team swing into action. The Angels Committee commandeers one of the art prep rooms and begins making badges and posters. They place announcements in the daily bulletin and co-opt two other teachers, Mr. Tomsett (Mark) and Miss Criveli (Silvana), to help with the logistics.

Mr. Burns makes an official announcement over the public address system on Tuesday morning and cheers can be heard from classrooms around the school. On Thursday the students start dropping off Big M cartons at the A-Block staffroom.

By Friday the aroma of stale milk is overpowering and we shift the operation to the school garage in the lower quadrangle. We now have a larger space to wash and bundle the Big M labels.

By week’s end, our tally reaches 4,125 labels. Not too bad for a school of 1,000 students.

Week 3 of the competition

Lara and her friends continue to promote the competition (e.g., by visiting and speaking to students in classrooms throughout the school). Mark and Silvana take responsibility for the garage and enrol a small team of volunteers to assist (mostly Grade 9 and 10 students).

A noticeable pattern to the Big M contribution begins to emerge. The senior students seem to decide that it is “uncool” to be associated with a Year 10 project even if they are Angels fans. At the other end of the grade-level spectrum, the Year 7 and 8 students are curious but their musical tastes haven’t as yet fully embraced the type of loud, rock and roll music that characterizes the Angels hits.
The few junior and senior students who are enthusiastic drop off their Big M cartons either before or after school when there aren’t too many students around to see them doing so. Despite the Angels Committee’s attempt at school-wide participation, the project is largely perceived as a Grade 9 and 10 effort.

Some schools in the competition ring in their weekly tallies to Triple M who announce the leading contenders each Saturday at 7:05 pm, directly after the news broadcast. As expected, the bigger public and private schools are reporting large tallies. Geelong Grammar leads with over 12,000 labels.

Our tally: 7,461.

Week 4 of the competition

Lara has redoubled her efforts. She seems to be everywhere as the spokesperson for EDHS’s efforts: leading by example (collecting and contributing Big Ms); encouraging and supporting the Angels Committee in their daily work; and helping out in the garage during lunchtime and after school.

It is clear that she and her fellow supporters are scrounging milk cartons from wherever they can find them; some contributions are very old and battered. Lara’s enthusiasm never seems to dim. Unfortunately the accumulation of our Big M cartons doesn’t match her enthusiasm. After all, how much milk can Year 9 and 10 students drink?

Tom is delighted overall with our attempt to involve the school community and mentions on more than one occasion that “it’s the journey, not the destination, that is important,” a refrain that will no doubt appear in an upcoming “Newsletter to Parents.”

It’s 5:30 pm, Friday afternoon, and Mark, Silvana, and I are the last ones in the garage. The students have all left. We have just finished the weekly count: 12,932 labels. I think that the students were anticipating that our tally would be much larger. Unfortunately, it barely matches the tallies of the leading schools reported by Triple M last Friday.

Nonetheless, we look with pride at the four neatly stacked boxes of labels in the garage and know that Lara and her committee can be well satisfied that they have done their best. Silvana locks the garage and we head home.

On the weekend I catch up on school work that the Big M competition has interrupted during the past week and forget about the competition.

My brother calls at 7:06 pm on Saturday night.

Congratulations!

What for?

Triple M just announced your tally. You’re in front with 20,000 points. Geelong Grammar School is in second place with 19,000.

What? We only have 13,000 labels.

That’s not what Triple M says. You are in the lead.

Are you sure it wasn’t Doncaster High School just down the road?

Nope. It is East Donnie for sure.

I’m confused.
Week 5 of the competition

The school is abuzz on Monday morning. It seems as if everyone has heard that we are in the lead. As I look across the quadrangle, a steady flow of students are leaving plastic bags of Big Ms at the garage. Even junior and senior students are dropping off their contributions right up to the start of the school day.

I wave to Silvana and Mark and join them at the garage. We marvel at the small mountain of Big Ms cartons before us; at least as many again as we had collected up to this point last Friday. The garage volunteers will have their work cut out this week.

As we ponder the difference between our Friday night tally and Triple M’s Saturday night announcement a yell from across the quadrangle catches our attention.

Mr. Clarke! Mr. Tomsett! Miss Crivelli!

The bell for the first class sounds as Lara jogs our way. She has a big grin on her face and a plastic bag of Big Ms in each hand.

Lara!

Morning Mr. Clarke.

Lara?

Two Grade 7s gave me these.

She places the bags on the garage floor. In response, I choose my words carefully.

They will add nicely to our lead position in the competition.

Before I have a chance to say any more, she blurts out:

O.K. Sorry. It was me. I rang Triple M.

You did?

And they asked me for an estimate. I am not very good at estimating. Mr. Tomsett can tell you that (Mark is Lara’s math teacher).

She can see the disappointment in our faces as Mark points out the discrepancy between our Friday night tally and Lara’s Saturday night estimate.

Lara, we don’t have 7,000 labels.

She glances at the new pile of Big Ms in the centre of the garage floor.

We might have now?

Lara’s cheeks turn red signalling that she recognizes she is being chastised. We look at each other as we consider our predicament. I make a decision.

OK. That might be true but we have to think about Triple M’s announcement. Let’s see what we have by the end of this week and if we fall short of 20,000 we will ring Triple M and tell them the truth.

We all nod in agreement. Before Lara leaves Silvana has some advice.
Lara, please, please, please, no more ringing Triple M without checking with us?

OK. Miss Crivelli. No more phone calls.

The bell rings for the start of the school day as we head off to our various classes. Despite the circumstances leading to Triple M’s announcing that we are leading the competition, it is clear that our Monday morning’s contributions mark a turning point in the school community’s response to the Big M/Triple M Angels contest. Big Ms continue to flow in over the course of the week, at times overwhelming the garage volunteers who struggle to keep up with washing, cutting, counting, and bundling the labels.

At Friday lunchtime, Lara, the Angels Committee, Silvana, Mark, and I meet in the garage. Our tally at the moment is 21,567. We still have more Big Ms that need to be cut and counted. We decide not to ring Triple M.

Instead, Lara suggests that we ask the principal to make an announcement at the end of the school day letting the students know our current tally. Tom agrees and when he makes the announcement, resounding cheers can be heard from around the school.

Triple M’s announcement on Saturday night indicates that we are neck and neck with Geelong Grammar School for first place and that Marcellin College is close behind.

Week 6 of the competition

The school has gone nuts! Year 12 students are spotted dumpster diving at the local mall for Big M cartons; parents are dropping off Big M cartons during the day; and even Mr. Burns is seen dropping a few cartons in the Big M collection box in the main staffroom. The school is totally transformed. Silvana, Mark, and I call it the “Lara Effect.”

I am beginning to see Lara differently from the student who stopped me in the quadrangle and asked about entering the Angels contest five weeks ago. My earlier estimation of Lara’s talents has been challenged dramatically in the past few weeks. The impact that she has had on the school is nothing short of extraordinary. Even Mr. Burns is amazed by the palpable sense of pride, excitement, and anticipation that Lara’s idea and her enthusiasm for the project has created across the school community.

Also I have begun to think differently about how and in what way our schools serve our students. I am a strong believer in “success breeds success.” And unquestionably Lara has been extraordinarily successful in ways that aren’t measured on end-of-year exams. For a school that prides itself on student achievement, Lara is challenging us to think more broadly about curriculum. Years later, I realize more fully the broader implications of the educative agenda and how teachers are called upon to act in their daily practice with students (Wrigley, Lingard, & Thomson, 2012).

On the final Friday afternoon, we tie the last few bundles together and calculate our tally. Tom Burns signs the official letter and we fax it off to Triple M. The office phone rings 30 minutes later with Triple M requesting confirmation from our principal of the total. Mr. Burns obliges.
At 7:05 pm on Saturday night, Triple M announces the results of the contest. They work their way from third place to first place.

*And in first place, with 35,854 points, the winning school: East Doncaster High School.*

**Three months later**

The Angels perform live at East Doncaster High School.

![Image of The Angels](image_url)

**Figure 4**

**WHAT LARA TAUGHT ME**

Within the context of *Speaking of Learning*, I have tried to illustrate the learning that took place when I began to articulate for myself the difference between what it meant to be a *teacher* and what it meant to be an *educator*. Put simply, I began to realize that, above all, my responsibility to my students was to facilitate (and model) how “to live well in the world.” The full realization of this concept did not occur in a single “Aha” moment but was the result of numerous encounters with students, parents, and staff over the years at East Doncaster High School where I taught for 12 years.

My engagement with Lara was perhaps one of the most significant events leading to this realization. The scale and magnitude of what Lara achieved was the tipping point as my view of schooling, its purpose, and its potential shifted significantly. Others have written about this notion more eloquently (e.g., Palmer,
1997) but it took the immediacy of my experience with Lara in the context of my daily practice (Munby & Russell, 1994) for me to fully appreciate schooling and curriculum in its broadest context (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995).

What if I had said “No” to Lara?

Supporting students’ requests to participate in deviant non-curricular events was not a part of my teacher preparation. Melbourne University prepared me and the Victorian Ministry of Education employed me to teach physical education, mathematics, and computer science. Based on the explicit and implicit messages conveyed to me as part of my teacher education program, as a high school teacher my task was to prepare students for their Year 12 examinations. I think that missing from both my preparation and initial employment was any sense of the moral and ethical purposes of schooling that were, much later, to have a profound effect on my understanding of what I did in schools (precipitated by events such as my work with Lara detailed above). Maybe these elements were present in my teacher education program or the early days of my career and I just didn’t recognize them.

If as Southern suggests, “[a]s relational beings, we construct our world through language,” (Southern, 2005, p. 39) then the difference between being a teacher and an educator takes on particular significance in this context. At East Doncaster High School I taught three subjects. I now realize that that duty occupied only 50% of what I did at EDHS. Lara helped me to understand what constituted the other 50%.

As I reflect on my current role as a teacher educator preparing young people for the profession, I wonder if the speed with which I was prepared, and at which we currently prepare young people for teaching, means that there is a stronger likelihood that the essence of being an educator is in danger of being lost altogether. We have many wonderful young people entering the profession but in my recent experience a number of those beginners quickly retreat and hold fast to very traditional and conservative ways of teaching and seem to stay that way.

My story then is a cautionary tale of why and how the difference between being a teacher and being an educator is not something that should be taken for granted nor should it be left to fate or chance; the difference and the importance it has for the students in our classrooms should be uppermost in our minds.

In telling Lara’s story, I am reminded that:

I identify, problematize, and specify what it is that I am being attentive to.

As I do this, I also draw on my feelings and emotions in re-storying the event. I set the stage and paint the landscape to sufficiently portray as vividly as possible the essence of the event as it unfolded for me. I give emphasis to some elements and relegate others to background colour. Each of these decisions requires that I pause, think, and then act—that is, to make choices.... Unavoidably, I am deeply implicated in the retelling. The story and "I" are interwoven and although the difference between the two might not be readily apparent....the rendering of ‘the other’ is a always a rendering of ‘self.’ (Clarke, 2012)

So, although this story is about Lara, more importantly it is about what Lara taught me. It is a lesson about the broader purposes of schooling. It is a lesson about the difference between being a teacher and being an educator. And it represents what I currently try to live in my daily practice with students, teachers, and teacher
educators in the hope that they will reap the rewards of their efforts, whatever form those rewards might take. For example, one of the most delightful moments in the Lara story happened immediately after the concert. Doc Neeson, the lead singer of the Angels, asked to meet the students who had been responsible for EDHS winning the contest. As a result, not only did Lara get to meet her rock and roll hero but had her photograph taken (with her blond hair somewhat dishevelled after the concert) standing proudly beside him. What a thrill!

Figure 5

REFERENCES


